Independent charismatic churches in a period of post-modernisation – a case study of the Christian Outreach Centre Movement

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Abstract

The period from the mid 1960s to the present has witnessed a decline in many established churches. At the same time, it also saw the emergence of new religious groups, and within Christianity, the blossoming of revival movements. This paper describes a case study of an independent charismatic church, the Christian Outreach Centre (COC), and the denomination that grew from it during this period of rapid social change. It seeks to illuminate the particular appeal of new charismatic Christian churches, and to show how their innovative religious and organisational practices buttressed their growth during this period. The COC was an Australian religious group that was founded in Brisbane in 1974, before growing into a national and international movement with over 700 member churches. It was a local development that interacted with, and adapted, overseas religious models as an aid to developing contemporary avenues for religious expression. The COC developed innovative responses to the changes associated with advancing suburbanisation, de-institutionalisation and post modernity. It encouraged greater involvement of laity, the working class, women, and youth, and sought to give these religious consumers greater choice appropriate to increased market options. The COC was quick to use new technologies and media, including television, to start religious schools and a tertiary college, to expand into welfare programs, overseas aid agencies and political lobbying. Through merging socially conservative Christian beliefs with creative responses to local and global developments the COC grew into one of Australia's larger mega churches by the late twentieth century. In conclusion we suggest that the particular appeal of the COC lies in its experiential (rather than creedal or dogmatic) theology, and in its adaptive religious and social practices. Its rapid growth allowed it to maintain organisational flexibility appropriate to these practices, but its long term sustainability is, as yet, untested in the face of organisational stagnation or decline.

Key Words: Australian Christianity; Social Change; Pentecostalism; Charismatic Movement; Postmodernity.

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Introduction: Religious Decline and Renewal

The period from the mid 1960s to the present witnessed a decline in attendance and in influence of many churches that was referred to at the time, as 'the most significant trend in religion', the 'greatest problem facing the church, and the 'great contemporary crisis in religion' (Salisbury 1964, 289; Acquaviva 1979, 196). However, a study of the patterns of religious attendance in Australia during the twentieth century does not show a steady decline that secularisation theorists had predicted (Bruce, 1998, 28, 224f). Nor does it show a steady increase that revivalists have hoped for. Rather, the attendance patterns show a cyclical pattern of periods of decline associated with institutional consolidation and difficulties adjusting to social and religious change, and periods of religious renewal and growth that are associated with innovative adaptations by revivalist movements. Scholars including Cox (1996) and Davie (1994) have noted that one of the more significant revivalist groups to develop globally during the last century has been Pentecostalism. The following paper describes a case study of an independent Pentecostal - charismatic church, and examines its adaptive responses to the religious and social changes that were occurring in the late twentieth century.

Hans Mol's study, *Religion in Australia* (1972), based on a questionnaire distributed in 1966, describes a period of steady growth in attendance at, and support for, institutional churches in the period of post World War II reconstruction up until the early 1960s. Self reported church attendance in Australia reached a high of 27 percent in 1961 following the Billy Graham crusades, leading Mol to conclude that religious belief in Australia at that time was static, stable and high. This growth was followed by a period of a decline in church attendance and influence, that was shared by many Western countries. During the 1970s, regular church attendance in Australia fell rapidly, reaching a low of around 18 percent monthly attendees by 1979 (Evans and Kelly, 2000). However, this decline in support for established institutions was broader than just religion. As Putnam (2000) observed in the United States, and Davie observed in Britain (1994), virtually every form of civic and communal involvement experienced a downturn in the late twentieth century as established institutional claims to authority struggled amid the growth of egalitarianism, individualism, consumer choice, free market competition and competing alternative activities. The decline reflected the difficulty that all traditional and voluntary institutions faced in responding to the rapid social, geographic, economic and other changes that were occurring as the singular claims of previously dominant traditional institutions were challenged by the pluralism of an increasingly complex, globalised, mass mediated world.

This decline levelled out in the 1980s, and a slight increase in attendance was seen in the 1990s that was at least partly aided by the growth of Pentecostalism. Barrett and Johnson (2002) estimate that Pentecostalism grew from a few thousand adherents at the beginning of the twentieth century to over 500 million by the centuries end, making it one of the largest sub groups within Christianity. Within Australia, Pentecostalism has grown to become the second largest group of weekly church attendees after the Catholics (Carey 1996, 18; Hughes 1996). Like Methodism from which many of it sprang, Pentecostalism has also pursued wider goals of renewal in society, that showed similarities to other new social movements that emerged at the time.
While there are important differences between new social movements and religious movements, particularly in their motivation and organisation, the new social and religious movements also show analogous concerns and methods, including a common apprehension over the complexity of pluralistic, globalised, industrial and post industrial societies, and the alienation and loss of significance of the individual. Both movement types challenged an over dependence on the rational basis for institutional authority

and favoured more emotionally expressive, individualised alternatives. Both warn of the consequences that accompanied narrow adherence to unfetted modernity, and

both encourage the pursuit of newer, post-modern paradigms. New social and religious movements do not simply oppose modernity. They seek to re-appropriate modernity on their own terms, developing multiple re-interpretations and institutional expressions of it (Eisenstadt, 2000, Hannigan 1990, Eisenstadt 2000). At the same time, new revivalist religious movements such as Pentecostalism show significant differences to social movements in their tendency for over dependence on narrow belief systems, authoritarian leadership structures, and lower systems of accountability. Fortunately, an emerging religious free market, of which Pentecostalism is a part, has encouraged greater self correction and countered isolationism, authoritarianism and introspection.

Pentecostal Origins

Hollenweger (1992, 1997) and Synan (1975) traced the origins of Pentecostal beliefs and practices to the earlier Pietistic concerns; to John Wesley's conviction concerning a post salvation experience; to the Holiness and Keswick movements emphasis on sanctification; to European and North American Revivalism; and to the attraction of J.N. Darby's pre-millennialism. The Pentecostal thesis that tongues speaking was evidence of God's empowerment can be traced to Charles Parham, and his Bible School in Topeka, Kansas at the beginning of the twentieth century. Hollenweger (1997) noted that the global appeal of Pentecostalism was particularly indebted to the influence of Parham's Afro-American student, William Seymour, who brought to the Azusa Street revival, an emphasis on oral liturgy, narrative theology and witness, participation of the whole community in worship and service, the inclusion of dreams and visions in private and public worship, an emphasis on the relationship between body and mind manifested in healing through prayer, and bodily movement in dance, that further increased the attraction of the new movement. The fusion of the religion of poor whites with the more experiential, physically demonstrative religion of poor blacks provided Pentecostalism with a powerful amalgam of beliefs and practices that was able to cross many cultural barriers and becoming a truly global phenomenon. As Cox (1996) noted, the Pentecostal customs of tongues speaking and other charismatic gifts, provided repeatable, immanent experiences of the presence of God at a time when the reality and relevance of religion was being challenged. They also provided a universal symbol of divine enablement and social and racial equality that has been particularly appealing during the twentieth century.

Local, but globally influenced

While some have claimed that Pentecostalism was the exporting of American culture, the global genesis and spread of Pentecostalism reflect its capacity to initiate local, autonomous groups that combine global and local religious expressions. To use Roland Robinson's term, they are a 'glocal' movement (Robertson, 1995). Where Pentecostalism has been influenced by North American culture, it was not shaped by a single, ubiquitous way of life, but by localised sub-cultural developments, particularly from the Southern and Western United States. Pentecostalism incorporated the vibrant music and religion of the Afro-American culture of the southern United States, as it spread and found a wider audience. Pentecostals also incorporated the pioneering narratives of the American West and the notions that opportunity and rewards came to rugged individuals who adapted and used of new technologies, and who sought to do

better than their European forebears. Pentecostalism was also influenced by the political and religious conservatism and fundamentalism of the American South and West, and by their symbolic descriptions of moral decline, crises of faith, and portrayals of millenarian religious hope (Cawelti, 2002). In Australia, Pentecostalism developed a different character. It rejected American fundamentalism, and the 'pretentious proclamatory style' of English and European Christianity and developed a more egalitarian, pragmatic style that reflected its local Australian origins.

The capacity of Pentecostal and charismatic groups to generate new, local, indigenised groups led by highly motivated local leaders in each place that it spread to has been noted by a number of scholars, including Melvin Hodges (1953), Harvey Cox (1996), and Margaret Poloma (2000). Chant (1999) observed that the majority of early Australian Pentecostal groups were started by local Australians, and that many were started by Australian women. In contrast to European styles of Christianity and social forms that often put Australian churches at odds with their clientele, Australian Pentecostals were rapid adopters of emerging local and popular cultures, and they gave their members greater opportunities for self expression. The newer Australian Pentecostal and charismatic churches adapted quickly to changing social and religious contexts, and rapidly developed localized, contemporary religious practices, at a time of growing interest in Australian culture and new indigenised versions of Australian Christianity, and in popular American culture (Millikan 1983).

Australian Pentecostalism is an eclectic movement that has interacted with various local and overseas religious developments. In the post World War II period Australian Pentecostalism increasingly looked to developments arising from Australia's cultural and religious realignment from Europe towards North America and the Pacific Rim. They gathered material from the neo-evangelicalism of Billy Graham; healing evangelism of Oral Roberts; the faith movement of Kenyon, Hagin and Copeland; the "latter–rain" preaching of Ray Jackson; the Full Gospel Businessmen's movement of Demos Shakarian; the church growth message of Donald McGavran and Peter Wagner; the pre–millennialism of writers like Hal Lindsay and Tim LaHaye; the creationism of Henry Morris; the visualisation and church growth message of Korean, Yongi Cho. However, these overseas global developments were not unquestioningly accepted. Like many overseas influences, they were modified, indigenised, and transformed, in an effort to adapt them to local conditions (Bell and Bell, 1998).

Latter Rain Influenced Churches

Although Pentecostalism was initially known in the early twentieth century for its freedom, vitality and innovation, the Pentecostal denominations that formed from this had become institutionalised by the 1950s and 60s, and their growth had slowed. Like many traditional churches, Pentecostalism found increasing difficulty adapting to the rapid changes associated with the social, cultural and youth revolutions that were taking place in the 1960s and 70s. At the same time, the rise of newer charismatic practices was often resisted by Pentecostal groups, and by traditional church institutions. This resistance helping to swell the number of new independent charismatic groups that began to form. Institutionalisation within Pentecostal churches also led many their members to begin to hope for a revival of their earlier vitality in the second half of the twentieth century. Some felt that a long expected renewal had arrived when new revivalist phenomena, including more contemporary choruses, repeated singing of scriptures set to music, singing in tongues, individualised prophecy, and typological teaching were observed at meetings led by George Hawtin in Saskatchewan, Canada, in 1948. The term 'latter rain', a term was taken from Joel 2:23 and Zechariah 10:1, and its predictions that God would pour out His Spirit in new

ways, as a ‘latter rain’ just prior to an ‘end time harvest of souls’. However, the movement’s anti-institutional practices, and its new baptismal formula appeared to be anti-trinitarian, leading to strong opposition from established Pentecostal and mainstream Churches, and this restricted its growth.

Despite the widespread opposition to the latter rain movement, its revivalist practices and beliefs were taken to New Zealand in the 1950s, largely through a visit by by Ray Jackson. This aided the growth of the New Life Centre churches into New Zealand’s largest Pentecostal movement. When some of the leaders who were influenced by the ‘new move’ of God in New Zealander relocated to Australia, they brought their innovative ‘latter rain’ practices and beliefs with them. These innovations helped to grow some of Australia’s largest and most vital churches. Frank Houston moved from Lower Hutt, New Zealand to Sydney in 1977 and he commenced the Christian Life Centre (CLC) church. This church, and the Hills CLC that his son, Brian Houston, established, have grown into Australia’s largest and most influential Pentecostal churches, and produced a sizable international movement. In 1980, Phil Pringle moved to Sydney and established another Sydney mega church, the Christian City Church. It has also grown into a national and international organisation. Houston’s assistant, the New Zealander, Trevor Chandler, moved to Brisbane in 1972 where he established the Brisbane Christian Life Centre (CLC). It grew into one of Brisbane’s first mega churches, and the largest church at the time. It too has grown into a national and international organisation.

To aid the growth of the CLC, Chandler employed and trained a young Methodist minister, Clark Taylor, as his assistant minister, thereby introducing him to the ‘new’ charismatic beliefs and practices. Taylor left the CLC and he establish a new independent charismatic church, the Christian Outreach Centre (COC). It has grown into one of Australia’s larger mega churches. The following case study examines the origins and growth of the Christian Outreach Centre (COC) that Taylor established, and the national and international organisation that grew from it.

A Case Study: The Christian Outreach Centre (COC)

The events in the lives of the founders of new religious movements frequently play a significant role in shaping the movements that they commence. As Erikson (1962, 14) noted, new movements usually begin to form when individuals see their private concerns as public problems that needed addressing. Hence, it is likely that many of the defining characteristics of the Christian Outreach Centre can be traced to life crises that were faced by the founder, and successive leaders of the Christian Outreach Centre.

As in the lives of other revivalists overseas and in Australia, the early life of the COC founder, Clark Taylor, was shaped by an upbringing in a relatively poor rural environment. In this rural setting, God is often seen as an unchanging, helper who watches over the ever changing, natural world (Larson, 1978). Taylor grew up on a 640 acre family farm at Palen Creek, near Rathdowney in Beaudesert, which is seventy miles south of Brisbane. His mother was a Methodist who prayed for her son often. His father was a hard working farmer with a strong drive to succeed. By the age of sixteen, Clark Taylor, who was the eldest son, had been given many responsibilities, including leading a mustering camp of sixteen aboriginal stockmen and forty stock horses in the Northern Territory. These outback experiences provided Taylor with a language with which Australians who were seeking a sense of national identity could identify. Taylor’s often told recollections used bush imagery that resonated with the emerging sense of what it meant to be Australian (Millikan 1983). His rough and ready

appearance, rugged pragmatism, masculinity, emphasis on mateship, and earthy realism, had a strong appeal to working class people in states of Queensland and Northern New South Wales where the COC movement was founded (Waugh 1995, 8). The death of Taylor's father in 1955, in a tractor accident when he was seventeen, dealt a blow to Clark's rural aspirations. However, Clark attended the Billy Graham crusade in 1959 he found a new role model to look up to and a new evangelical view of Christianity that had considerable appeal. Graham's form of evangelicalism emphasised conversion as an instantaneous process, the priority of the Bible as the revealed word of God, and the preaching of the gospel as a minister's chief task. It provided evangelical constructs that became key ingredients in Taylor's life and the COC movement that he founded.

Motivated by his conversion, Taylor began to study for the Methodist ministry in 1961. However, his ministry ambitions seemed to end after he contracted cerebral Malaria from a visit to Papua New Guinea in 1963. His struggle with Malaria induced seizures continued for the next four years. As is the case with many healing evangelists, Taylor's struggle with a debilitating illness aroused a life long interest in divine healing. In 1961, after seeking God, Taylor experienced a sense of divine healing and a cessation of the Malaria induced attacks. This miraculous experience convinced Taylor that divine healing was an essential component of effective Christian ministry today. In 1967 Taylor heard about and received 'the baptism in the Holy Spirit' and he spoke in tongues after being prayed for by an AOG minister from Ipswich. His lively experiences with charismatic movement gifts contrasted markedly with the dry intellectualism of the ministry training at the University of Queensland's King's College. Taylor's enthusiasm for these charismatic gifts and for divine healing helped him to become a well known preacher in the emerging charismatic movement. However, these experiences also led him into increased conflict with the Methodist establishment. Consequently, Taylor resigned from the Methodist church and ministry training in 1970 to give himself greater freedom to pursue involvement with the charismatic movement.

In 1971, Taylor's skills in evangelism and charismatic movement gifts were recognised and he was appointed as assistant pastor in the Brisbane Full Gospel Church, and the Christian Life Centre (CLC) that formed from it. The CLC was led by the New Zealand charismatic leader, Trevor Chandler, who introduced many new charismatic practices and teachings from New Zealand to Australia, and Taylor learnt a great deal from this period.

In 1972 Taylor left the CLC to pursue two years of itinerant healing ministry in Australia, New Zealand, Fiji and America. This increased his contact with overseas Pentecostal and Latter Rain religious developments. However, Taylor found that the ability of an itinerant ministry to attract attendees did not last long after the minister left. He decided that new converts needed a well established continuing charismatic church environment where they could be nurtured. This belief led Taylor to return to Brisbane in 1974 to commence the Christian Outreach Centre (COC) there.

Twenty five people attended the first meeting of interested COC participants at Taylor's home on 16th June, 1974. A week later, over a hundred attendees were at the first meeting of the COC at the Teachers Union Building at Spring Hill. Taylor's emphasis on personal conversion, divine healing, a post- salvation 'baptism in the Holy Spirit' and words of knowledge attracted many who felt alienated and disenfranchised by the established, institutionalised denominational churches. The appeal of the COC was further enhanced by its experiential theology, its adaptive religious practices, and its adherence to a flexible oral traditions of Pentecostalism. The attraction of the COC, like that of Methodism from which it sprang, can be attributed to its ability to meld

together the apparently contradictory elements of modernisation and traditionalism, of capitalism and criticism of capitalism, and of community and individualism. Other characteristics that also aided its growth, just as they had aided Methodism's, included the capacity to make evangelical religion more enthusiastic, individualistic, egalitarian, entrepreneurial, and lay oriented. His distinctive emphasis on faith confession drew from the visit of Fred Price to Brisbane in 1976, and from the writings of EW Kenyon's books (Clark Taylor sermons). The COC also provided a strong sense of community at a time when community was in decline (Putnam 2000). The COC practices allowed for greater involvement of the laity, women, and working class attendees, and its contemporary music, worship and preaching built a bridge across the generational gap, attracting many from the baby boomer generation. Many attendees came from Taylor's former Methodist, CLC and charismatic circuit contacts. His rugged Australian emphasis also attracted many who did not normally attend church. The high level of interest in charismatic phenomena among people from mainline denominations helped the COC to grow to over 800 people by 1977.

Taylor recognised the opportunities that advances in electronic media such as television were opening for religious groups. While travelling in the United States Taylor saw the development of Christian Television there and this led him to develop a television program based on edited highlights of the COC's Sunday meetings. "*A New Way of Living*" was first aired in 1977 and it continued until the early 1980s. The use of television enhanced the COC's profile, enabled it to reach larger audiences and attract greater financial resources that aided the COC's further expansion. Thus the COC soon became a part of the new media driven lifestyle that was changing the way in which Christian religion was being consumed.

Recognising the importance of land for its future development, the COC moved to a 25 acre property in the Brisbane suburb of Mansfield. In May 1983 Harry Westcott opened the Mansfield COC auditorium that could seat over 2000 people. By 1988, using multiple services, the Mansfield COC was attracting over 3000 weekly attendees, making it one of Australia's largest churches of that time.

Within six years of the COC's establishment, interstate groups with similar interests began to seek affiliation with the emerging Mansfield COC mega church, and with Taylor's unique religious style. A national COC movement began to form when John Gear and David McDonald, were two former Methodists from Northern New South Wales facing similar difficulties with institutionalised Methodism to Taylor, asked to join the COC. As interest in the COC increased further during the 1980s Taylor established short term training programs for potential leaders who would be able to establish further COC churches. With the assistance of hundreds of enthusiastic recruits who asked for few supporting resources, and confidence in the charismatic theology of divine empowerment for mission, the COC movement grew rapidly. By 1990, the COC movement had grown to over 160 churches across Australia and interest in the COC was beginning emerging from overseas locations, particularly from pacific nations.

The rapid expansion of the Pentecostal and charismatic movements during the 1970s and 80s came at a cost. In the United States, Jimmy Bakker resigned in 1987, and Jimmy Swaggart in 1988, over allegations of sexual, financial and other forms of misconduct. Difficulties associated with rapid growth and insufficient accountability in Australia also emerged about this time. The founder of the Logos movement resigned in the late 1980s over allegations of sexual impropriety and the movement he founded soon folded. In 2000 Frank Houston, left the Christian Life Centre in Sydney. Allegations of a sexual nature were later raised as a reason for his resignation. On April 8th, 1990, the founder of Christian Outreach Centre, resigned after he was found to have been involved in a repeat of earlier sexual misconduct allegations that arose in the late 1970s.

These failures of some of the Pentecostal pioneers of mega churches in the late 1980s raises a number of questions. These failures indicate that too much power had been given to solitary, charismatic leaders who had failed to develop sufficient systems of accountability and support. They point to an over emphasis on experientialism and the pragmatic pursuit of numerical growth that contributed to a failure to cultivate more wholistic requirements for life and for the church

Without the dynamism of Taylor, and stung by the implications of their leaders moral failure, the growth of the COC movement in Australia effectively stalled and the number of Australian COC churches was little changed a decade later. The COC's position as one of Australia's largest mega churches and most vibrant movements was soon overtaken. The Australian AOG was rejuvenated in 1977 by the appointment of Andrew Evans as its new leader, and the Hillsong AOG mega church led by Brian Houston provided the leading role model for many Australian churches. After Taylor's resignation, stronger accountability systems were introduced to the COC that aided its survival. Neil Miers, who was another ex Methodist who had grown the second largest COC, was appointment as the COC movement's new leader. His appointment ensured the survival of the COC and aided its expansion overseas.

While growth of the COC movement in Australia slowed in the 1990s, increased interest in the movement began to come from overseas where Christians faced similar difficulties with institutionalisation that the COC leaders had faced. Many felt that they could identify with unique dynamism of the Australian COC movement. By 1991, the COC had opened thirteen centres in New Zealand, twelve in Papua New Guinea, twenty-two in the Pacific Islands, two in Malaysia, four in England, and seven in Chile. Under the new COC leadership, by 1999 the movement had spread to 617 centres in 31 countries. This growth again demonstrated the ability of Pentecostalism to blend together local and global religious influences to aid religious renewal (Cox 1996, 102). The COC leaders concerns about the secularisation of the government education system led them to commence a new type of charismatic Christian School in 1977. These schools were commenced using the American, Southern Baptist, Accelerated Christian Education (ACE) program that Taylor heard about while visiting New Zealand. However, the COC leaders soon recognised the limitations of the ACE system and its American oriented material, and this was soon replaced with a curriculum designed for local Australian needs and government accreditation. Aided by this new localised curriculum and school structure, the COC school grew to over 1420 students by 2004, making it the seventh largest independent school in Queensland (Brisbane COCB website). COC schools were also started at Nambour, Toowoomba and other locations. Although they initially used the ACE system, they also changed over to the local Australian structure.

In order to staff the new Christian schools, the COC commenced one of the first privately funded Australian tertiary institutions, the Christian Heritage College (CHC) in 1986, using material from Tim LaHaye's Christian Heritage College in San Deago. However, recognition of the limitations of this American prototype led to the development of a more localised, Australian model. The CHC received accreditation of the Diploma of Teaching from the Queensland Board of Advanced Education in July 1988. The Christian Heritage College has since grown into a sizeable tertiary institution that offers undergraduate and post- graduate courses in Education, Business, Social Sciences and Ministry to over 700 students.

The COC leaders efforts to influence the wider society also motivated expansion into local "community care" programs that provided material assistance to local people who were in need. They also initiated an overseas "global care" program to raise funds and initiate overseas aid programs, medical clinics, orphanages and schools. The COC

member's efforts to influence government are seen in their members involvement in forming the Australian Christian Coalition (ACC), modelled on a similar movement in United States. Its name was more recently changed to the Australian Christian Lobby (ACL) in recognition of more specific local needs.

Conclusion

The COC is an informative example of an emerging new charismatic movement that was started by local Australian Methodists in the second half of the twentieth century. Using innovative religious beliefs and practices, the founders, and the group they established, has attempted to redress reasons for the decline in influence and attendance in traditional Christian churches. It sought to adapt to global religious developments, particularly those arising in evangelical and Pentecostal sub cultures in the Southern and Western United States, and pacific-rim nations of New Zealand and Korea. The COC has been particularly influenced by neo evangelical, Pentecostal, latter rain, divine healing, faith confession, and premillennialist movements. However, the COC did not uncritically adopt overseas models. It adapted, modified and indigenised them. By merging socially conservative Christian beliefs with creative overseas and local responses to social and religious change, the COC was able to grow one of Australia's larger mega churches, and a sizable national and international religious movement. The COC's religious beliefs and their organisational practices gave their attendees greater choice that was appropriate to advancing suburbanisation, deinstitutionalisation, and modernity, the development of new technologies, and increasing consumer diversity. It encouraged greater involvement of laity, the working class, women, and youth, and sought to give these religious consumers greater choice appropriate to increased market options. The rapid growth of the COC into a national and international movement, and its capacity to respond to difficulties was aided by its ability to maintain an organisational flexibility that is appropriate to its experiential practices. When the rapid growth was accompanied by difficulties associated with the narrowness of its religious paradigms, its authoritarian organisational structures, and limited accountability, the COC showed a capacity for self correction, institutional redevelopment, and interaction with the wider society. The appeal of the COC lies in its experiential, rather than creedal or dogmatic, theology, and in its adaptive religious and social practices. Its rapid growth has allowed it to maintain organisational flexibility appropriate to these practices, but its long term sustainability is, as yet, untested in the face of organisational stagnation or decline.

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